

Tracing Eastern Influences in *The Fakeer of Jungheera*

Dr. Goswami Shivdani Giri

Asst. Professor

Department of English

Jamtara College, Jamtara

S.K.M. University, Dumka (Jharkhand)

Abstract

The paper aims at analysing various influences that Henry Derozio underwent in the composition of his *Fakeer of Jungheera*. The reviewers and commentators, while admitting some poetic merits in the poem, find it largely imitative of Byron and hence greatly wanting. However, a close first-hand study of the poem along with the poet's notes alluded to it throws light on a number of facts related to its subject matter and style. It is revealed that far from being modelled on Byron's ballads like *The Corsair* or *The Siege of Corinth* or *The Prisoner of Chillon*, it is unmistakably Indian in conception and amazingly rich in local colours and imagery. Even the apparent similarity is superficial, and instead of being a fanciful tale, the *Fakeer of Jungheera* is the poetic recreation of a real-life episode heard by and believed in by the poet. The paper also examines the art of poetic diction and devices that the poet employs in the poem.

Keywords- Landscape, Oriental Imagery, Rig-veda, Betal Puncheesi

Introduction

In the entire range of Indian English poetry, Henry Derozio's *Fakeer of Jungheera* is a ballad of exquisite beauty. It was directly prompted by the panorama of rural life beside the river Ganges, and the "beautiful and truly romantic" (Derozio, 121) scenes of the rock of Jungheera at Sultangunj, in Bhagalpur.). E.W. Madge opines that it was amid the country scenery, with the ripple of the river Ganges in his ears and the music in his heart that Derozio began to weave his wreath of the song in his early teens. In the words of Edwards:

Here, at Bhagalpur, there fell on Derozio's (sic) and eye, and lingered in his memory, the plash of oars in the river: the greetings and gossip of women round the well: the creaking of the yoke : the patient toil of the ryots in their fields: the sounds that happy children make at play their voices conning lessons, squatted in the mud under a peepul tree or the shade of a varandah: the song of girls grinding at the mill: the wheel and deft hand of the potter fashioning the homely vessels of the ryot and the thicket and the jungle, full of teeming life: the roar of the tiger by nigh: the stroke of the coppersmith at his forge: the drums and music and songs and processions of pujahs and marriage-feasts, the rippling laughter, half muffled head and gleaming eyes, and winsome face and figure of village beauties and over all this myriad tinted, many voiced, ever changing scene, full of life and beauty and wonder, the glorious panorama of an Indian sunset, when in the west clouds wreath themselves in slow majestic motions and unfold their changeful, chameleon tints, deepening into blackest night, and day and its glories seem like a gorgeous dream of beauty, swallowed up by darkness. (Edwards, 24-25)

Written during his stay at Tarapur, Monghyr (now spelt Munger) at the age of fifteen or sixteen, it is his longest and most sustained effort in poetry. The poet takes in this metrical tale the “strictly Indian” (ibid 135) theme of love and war. As Derozio writes, “I had a view of the rocks from the opposite bank of the river, which was broad, and full at the time when I saw it, during the rainy season. It struck me then as a place where achievements in love and war might well take place; and the double character I had heard of the Fakeer, together with some acquaintance with the scenery induced me to form a tale upon both these circumstances.” (ibid, 121)

The pathetic tale that has been narrated in great detail in the poem may succinctly be described in a couple of sentences. Nuleeni, a young widow, is driven to the burning ghat on the bank of the river Ganges at Sultanganj and is forced to cremate herself at the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. But the Fakeer, who is her former lover as well as the chief of a band of bandits, retrieves her from the pyre. She very pleasingly accompanies him to his stronghold, the rock of Jungheera. At this Nulinee's father is heartily grieved. He immediately goes to Shah Shuja's court at Rajmahal and calls for intervention and military assistance. Shah Shuja, who is then engaged in voluptuous pursuits in his palace, sends a thousand of bravest soldiers to help his cause under his command. The Fakeer resolves to quit the lawless life forever after plundering once and for all. But when he comes out of his

stronghold in the night, he encounters the soldiers, and a war ensues. Though he fights valiantly he is killed, and his band scatters. Nulinee becomes excessively frenzied finding his lover dead. She, too, dies out of shock hugging his dead body.

The identity of Nuleeni is not known. In this connection, Edwards observes: “Who the lady was, or what the circumstances were which parted their lives, will probably never now be known; but it is very evident that this episode in his life made a lasting impression on him and he steadily refused to marry, though frequently solicited to do so by his mother and sister”. (Edwards, 26-27).

Veracious Depictions of the Indian landscape

The poem opens with a vigorous description of nature and its phenomena. It abounds in poetic metaphor “which would have furnished almost the whole stock-in-trade of better-known singers” (ibid, 195). In the likeness of young spirits in flights, the invisible wind wandering sometimes over the flower-bells, strewing fragrance and at other times stealing through the grass, producing rustle, breathes a mild sigh as a lover does. The sunlit stream breaks into dimples, infusing heavenly hopes into an earthly creature just as a sleeping child wakes smiling gaily on its mother. The sun, discharging an infinite flood of light, appears like a golden urn. The rays of the sun descend like a boon upon the earth and bring its beauties forth. The butterfly flitting from field to field is a cheerful and happy creature of the sky. It is as if an angel had plucked a flower from the immortal bower of heaven and sent it to the earth after adding wings to it as an earnest of eternal powers. The giddy bee, enamoured of gathering nectar from flowers, roves from shrub to shrub on its quivering, melodious wing. Even as it sips honey from the flowers’ lips it flies like a faithless lover. The chequered shade of the banyan tree excites great admiration in the poet who drank deep in all sweet influences of nature. To quote the last few lines from Canto I, Section I:

O! there beneath the chequered shade
By the wide-spreading Banyan made,
How sweetly wove might be the theme
Of gifted bard's delicious dream!
His temples fanned by freshening air,
His brain by fancies circled fair,
His heart on pleasure's bosom laid,
His thoughts in robes of song arrayed -
How blest such beauteous spot would be

Unto the soul of minstrelsy! (Lines 33-42).

The description of the rising sun is full of strange beauties. It is Derozio's strong affinity for nature that makes this description so vivid and true:

The golden God of day has driven

His chariot to the western gate

Of yonder red resplendent heaven,

Where angles high to hail him wait. (Canto I, Section II, Lines 1-4)

As suggested by Makarand R Paranjape, "This section is remarkable for its celebration of the Indian landscape, which though semi-tropical, is lush and sunny. Derozio harks back, perhaps unconsciously, to Kalidasa and the great tradition of Sanskrit poetry in which the flora, fauna, and landscape of India were celebrated.... Quite unlike later colonial descriptions of the maddening heat of India, Derozio's notion of the Indian sun is quite mild and more pleasant.... Derozio's sun is no mythological abstraction, but a very real, Eastern phenomenon that actually affects the climate and vegetation of the land." (Paranjape, 47)

Canto of the *Fakeer of Jungheera* is also enriched with some of the most vigorous verses. Section I opens with vivid pictures of the Mandar mountain, festooned with natural beauty by night:

DARK shadows are falling on holy Mandar,

Who rears his bold brow like a monarch afar;

'Tis the time when the dove seeks his mate in her nest,

And beauty lies pillowed on Love's gentle breast. (Lines 1-4)

....

And the gush of the fountain afar is as soft

As the flute of young Krishna on mountains aloft;

When the boughs of the forest all gaily are swinging,

And flowers their rich fragrance around us are flinging;

When the Bulbul's loved mate, the Zuleikha of flowers,

Like a young eastern bride blooms unseen in her bowers;

When, the sorrowful moon looketh out to awaken

A thought in the gazer of maiden forsaken. (Lines 9-16)

This mountain, familiarly known as Mandar Hill, is about 700 feet high and is situated near Bounsi in the Banka district of Bihar. According to Hindu Mythology, when Amrita (the substance of which a drop is supposed to render life to the dead and immortality to the living

things) was to have been won from the ocean, it was this hill which was used as the churning stick by the gods and the demons. The mountain is visible both from Tarapur, Munger and the Janghira village of Sultanganj, Bhagalpur. That Derozio knew this mountain and the mythology related to it is evinced in his own note to the lines, “Dark shadows are falling on holy Mandar,” It reads: “This mountain may be seen at a considerable distance from the place which forms the scene of the first part of this Canto. It was used by the Dios and Assoors for the churning of the ocean when the Amreeta was to have been won” (Derozio, 134)

Similarly the poet’s note to the lines, “When the Bulbul’s loved mate, the Zuleikha of flowers” reveals his wide reading. He writes, “The rose that is here alluded to, maybe well called the Zuleikha of flowers; Zuleikha, (the chaste wife of Potiphar, according to the Mussulmans) having been the most beautiful of women.” (ibid, 135)

Genuine Elements of Poetry

In different sections of Canto II, Derozio expresses “not only the close affinity of the varying moods and the life of a man with the changeful phases of nature, but also the sympathy that links together all created things, and that throws the beams of a warm love around on all Nature.” (Edwards, 203). The genuine elements of poetry such as picturesque and pleasing imagery, poetic fancy, dramatic intensity, and sympathy with nature and human nature, which were fully developed by Wordsworth and Burns, characterize the verses from Section X to XVIII. Parts of Section X are transcribed here:

How beautiful is moonlight on the stream!
How bright on life in Hope's enchanting beam;
Life moves inconstant, like the rippling rill,
Hope's and the moon's rays quiver o'er them still,
How soft upon each flower is fair moonlight
Making its beauty more serenely bright,
Bringing sweet sighs of fragrance from its breast
Where all its odours are, like thoughts, at rest. (Lines 1-8)

...

Thus shone the moon upon Jungheera's flower,
Nuleeni, rosebud of the rocky bower;
And thus soft beams upon the shallop lay
Which soon must bear her Robber-love away. (Lines 19-22).

Influence of Folklore and Brahmanical Handbooks

It is still in vogue among the Hindus that women sing in concert on different occasions of births, marriages and deaths. In marriages especially, songs of women go side by side with the chanting of Vedic mantras by the Brahmins. Canto I, Section VI, the “Chorus of Women” seems to have been influenced by the folk-song, sung by countrywomen during funeral processions and the self-immolation of widows. This folk song became extinct subsequent to the abolition of the suttee ritual.

The “Chorus of Brahmins” (Canto I, Section VIII) and the “Chief Brahmin” (Section IX) are invocations to the Sun., By scattering flowerets and sprinkling oriental spicy perfumes amid the tinkling sound of a cymbal, the Brahmins invoke assistance in the ritual. They ask to bring balm, myrrh, pure white pearl, diamond, choicest gifts, fans made of peacock’s wings with work of fine gold and ivory on it and with the handle of sandalwood so that the widow’s prayer could be heard by the deity, who further transmits “the offerings to the ancestors, nourish and protect them.” (Wikipedia) Needless to say, Brahmins take away these things along with other valuables and a handsome Dakshina (fees or honorarium). These choruses in the *Fakeer of Jungheera* are based on the shlokas (verses) contained in Brahmanical handbooks written in Sanskrit and the vernaculars.

Influence of the Rig-Veda

The Hymn to the Sun (Canto I, Section XIX) is full of strange beauties, and “has a steady flow and majestic ring about it.” (Edwards, 196). Nuleeni, wearing a coronal of flowers and lost in the memories of her former lover, stands speechless at the burning ghat by the side of her husband’s funeral pile. The gathered crowd encircles her, and someone speaks in her ear some strong compelling words related to self-immolation. She then sings her holy hymn to the Sun, the divine Savior kneeling her “heart in fervent adoration.” (Stanza 11, Line 42) It is a wonderful reading, a flash of genuine inspiration. To quote the third and the twelfth stanzas:

God of th' immortal mind! with power to scan
Thought that like diamonds in the cavern lie,
Though deeply bedded in the breast of man,
Distinct and naked to thy piercing eye. (Lines 9-12)

God of this beauteous world, whom earth and heaven
Adore in concert, and in concert love;
Thy praise is hymned by the perpetual seven

Bright wheeling minstrels of the courts above. (Lines 45-48)

In the composition of the “Hymn to the Sun”, the poet’s creative process seems to have been influenced greatly by the Rig-Vedic verses. The last two verses of the hymns addressed to the activity, character and greatness of the sun in the *Rig-Veda* as put by P. Thomas are given below:

Light-giving Varma! thy piercing glance dost scan,
In quick succession all this stirring, active world,
And penetrateth too the broad ethereal space,
Measuring our days and nights, and spying out all creatures.
Surya with flaming locks, clear-sighted god of day.

Thy seven ruddy mares bear on thy rushing car,
With these thy self-yoked steeds seen daughters of thy chariot,
Onward thou dost advance. To thy refulgent orb
Beyond this lower gloom, and upward to the light
Would we ascend, O Sun! thou god among the gods.’
(Internet Archive, Lines 11-20, Pages 73-74).

Derozio points out in this connection, "The Vedas, which are supposed to contain the essence of wisdom, declare in various places, wherever the language of praise is employed, that the object of such praise is the Deity or Brim, Thus fire is Biihm, the sun is Brihm, water is Brihm, and a number of other substances are glorified in like manner. It is necessary to state that all prayers in the ceremony of female immolation are addressed to the Sun." (Derozio, 128-29).

Influence of Tales and Legends

“The Legend of Shushan” (Canto II, Section V) is remarkable for its savage weirdness, which may be observed in the following passages:

‘Twas a dismal night; and the tempest sang
As it rushed o'er flood and fell;
And loud the laugh of spirits rang
With the demon's midnight yell. (Stanza 11, Lines 41-44)

And the shriek and cry rose wild and high
From many an earthless form;

And roar and shout cut through the sky,

And mixed with the voice of the storm. (Stanza 12, Lines 45-48)

The *Betal Punchisi*, popularly known as *Vikram-Betaal*, and originally written in Sanskrit by Shivdatt, played an overwhelming influence upon the poet's decision to write Section V, the "Legend of Shushan" of Canto II. He admits, "A student of that excellent institution, the Hindu College, once brought me a translation of the *Betal Puncheesa*, and the following fragment of a tale having struck me for its wildness, I thought of writing a ballad, the subject of which should be strictly Indian. The Shushan is a place to which the dead are conveyed, to be burnt." (Derozio, 135) How closely Derozio followed his original will be seen by a reference to his own notes. To quote parts of the fragment:

... 'Four miles south of this,' replied the Jogee, 'is a Shushan, where, on a tree, hangs a corpse; bring me that corpse, while I pray.' Having now sent the King away, the Jogee set himself down and commenced his devotion. The dark night frowned upon him; and such a storm with the rain came on, as if the heaven would have exhausted themselves, and never have rained again, while the demons and evil spirits set up a howl that might have daunted the stoutest heart. But the King held on his way, and though snakes came wreathing around his legs, he got free of them by repeating a charm. At last, overcoming all opposition, he reached the cemetery. where he saw demons beating human beings, witches gnawing the livers of children, and tigers and elephants roaring. As he cast his eyes upon a Serus tee, he saw its roots and branch in flames, and heard these words sounding from all quarters, 'Strike, strike! seize, seize! take care that none escape.' ... he went up to the tree, where he saw a corpse hanging with its head downwards.... Then fearlessly climbing the tree, he made a cut with his sword at the rope that suspended the corpse, which, as soon as it fell, began to cry. The King, hearing its voice. was pleased with the thought that it must have been a living being; then having descended, 'who are you?' said he to it. To his great astonishment, the corpse only laughed, and without any reply, climbed the tree.... (Cited in Derozio, 137-38)

Meter and Versification

The poem displays an adroit use of distinctive metres, which are extremely congruous with the altering tone of the narrative. As M.K. Naik has pointed out, the iambic tetrameter couplet has been employed "for straightforward narration" (Naik, 23) whereas a slower line has been adopted for the descriptive passages. The chorus of women is written in dactylic

metre and that of the Brahmins in trochaic metre, but the anapaestic meter has been adopted for the lively description of the battle. Derozio often reiterates the opening verses at the close in his poetry. This distinctive feature also appears repeatedly in the present poem. In the words of Thomas Edwards: "This repetition of the opening notes of the strain as the closing lines are dying on the ear, and thus carrying the memory and imagination back through the whole effect, and again down the line in thought, is a true poetic instinct which poets and musicians of the first order have frequently handled in a fashion to produce results of the happiest and most powerful description." (Edwards, 198).

Conclusion

The Fakeer of Jungheera was directly prompted by the panorama of rural life beside the river Ganges, and the "beautiful and truly romantic" (Derozio, 121) scenes of the rock of Jungheera at Sultangunj, in Bhagalpur.). One goes wrong in considering the bandit chief, named Fakeer as the subject of the poem. The prevalent Sati system is the real subject. The poet does not invent the Moslem lover in the form of the Fakeer, but as part of the legend, he happens to be there.

As an eastern tale, *the poem* "stands unrivalled amongst indigenous Indian poems in excellence and truthfulness of delineation and in beauty and fertility of poetic imagery." (Edwards 1884, 4) Passages of imaginative beauty, combined with the subtlety of observation and refinement of thought are to be found interspersed in abundance throughout the whole poem, and these seem manifestly influenced by folk songs, Brahmanical handbooks written in Sanskrit and vernaculars and the *Rig-veda*. It displays a command of easy and flowing versification and is characterized by an abundance of fancy. As *The Government Gazette* of December 29, 1830, writes, "*The Fakeer of Jungheera* evinces an extraordinary command of language and an acute perception of the beauty of nature and those idealities which form for the poet a world of his own." (Cited in Edwards, 175).

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